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Politics and Argument as a Means
of Coping with Ambiguity and Change

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## ABSTRACT

For some time the literature on organization politics has claimed that conflict and political activity can be positive. But this idea is incomplete without further development. This paper argues that organization politics is often an efficient and desirable means of achieving the basic task of organization itself. More specifically,

- organization politics can generate the discussion through which important policy alternatives are identified, compared, and evaluated; in the process individuals can gain new understanding of the organization and begin to act in new ways.

- organization politics can be routinized into an efficient form of governance or control which channels potentially disrupting differences of opinion into activity which benefits the organization as a whole.

- political systems which move toward this routinized form can facilitate the succession of individual leaders, and promote adaptation in the practices and beliefs which contribute to organization culture.

# POLITICS AND ARGUMENT AS A MEANS OF COPING WITH AMBIGUITY AND CHANGE[1]

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A basic and enduring challenge to those interested in organizations is to account for the possibility of organization, or co-ordinated action, itself. It's not easy to get people to act in an organized way. Not only are their self-interests often served by different actions, but each individual attends to somewhat different aspects of a task, interprets the available data in somewhat different ways and comes to somewhat different conclusions under the influence of different experience and training.

At present, the emphasis is on culture as the creator of common assumptions among individuals which reduce potential differences and promote organized activity. The success of books like Theory Z, In Search of Excellence, and Organizational Culture[2] attest to the widespread interest in shared assumptions, similar values and a sense of belonging as a means of generating loyalty, increasing effort, and achieving coordination in organizations.

While the work on organization culture offers important clues about how organization coordination is achieved, it is less helpful about how organization change occurs. Cyert and March made a convincing case some time ago that new decisions risk undoing carefully achieved coalitions among many different interests.[3] Yet in an ambiguous world changed conditions, as well as changed assessments of conditions, are quite likely, and they often lead to the need for new

organizational activity. Continued survival demands the ability to coordinate in new ways.

I believe that we need to look more closely at organization politics as a force for both coordination and change in organizations; where politics can be very broadly defined as "power in action."[4] Despite the negative connotations which cling to the idea of using power to gain desired outcomes within the organization, I believe that organization politics is often an efficient and desirable means of achieving the basic task of organization itself. More specifically,

- organization politics can generate the discussion through which important policy alternatives are identified, compared, and evaluated; in the process individuals can gain new understanding of the organization and begin to act in new ways.

- organization politics can be routinized into an efficient form of governance or control which channels potentially disrupting differences of opinion into activity which benefits the organization as a whole.

- political systems which move toward this routinized form can facilitate the succession of individual leaders, and promote adaptation in the practices and beliefs which contribute to organization culture.

## Politics as Talk

Many models of organization politics focus on decisions as a reflection of individual and group power. By focusing on outcomes, however, political theorists have overlooked interesting aspects of the process

of interest group interaction. Jockeying for position generates a stream of verbal and symbolic activity which can make a direct contribution to the work of the organization. In fact, the first of three basic assertions of this paper is that <u>argument</u> <u>between</u> <u>interest</u> <u>groups</u> <u>plays</u> <u>an</u> <u>important</u> <u>role</u> <u>in</u> <u>discovering</u>, <u>developing</u>, <u>and</u> <u>evaluating</u> <u>action</u> <u>alternatives</u> <u>for</u> <u>the</u> <u>organization</u>.

Political, self-interested, debate cannot be easily duplicated as a means of generating a wide range of action alternatives and protecting the organization from their less obvious negative consequences. Management alone, no matter how astute, cannot match the inventiveness and force of ideas created from a variety of more narrowly focused interest perspectives.

An example of the kind of idea development which politics supports can be drawn from a study Lou Pondy and I recently completed.[5] The school system we were studying had been involved for several years in an attempt to sell a no longer needed building. The decision to sell was re-examined after a group of angry parents complained to the school board about the large size of the third grade class in one of the remaining neighborhood schools. The superintendent, who did not feel an additional teacher was necessary, brought to the board records of class enrollments which demonstrated that the class was within the bounds of class size decisions made in the past.

Politics made an unexpected impact on policy at the next meeting, however, when a parent argued that declining enrollments tended to increase inequities in class size between buildings. This observation, based on data the superintendent himself had provided, did not lead to

a change in the third grade class, but it helped trigger the decision to investigate possibly centralizing students in the larger building which had been about to be sold. While the parent protest was not singly responsible for generating this alternative to sale, their self interested analysis was important both in generating the alternative and suggesting a dominant line of analysis in its evaluation.

Thus the talk and analysis which individuals engage in while attempting to pursue their own ends can stimulate others, including top management, to consider new alternatives. This is especially true because individuals and smaller groups often need to gain the support of others in order to fulfill their desires. They are motivated to present their arguments in the broadest possible light, showing, if possible, how the actions they support will benefit a larger number of constituents. When challenged, they try to show that the negative consequences of their choice will have minimal effects. This activity is balanced by the activities of others in the organization whose self perceived interests motivate them to support alternative actions.

In the process of debate, organization members test their own commitment to the alternatives they discuss. In the school study, for example, the superintendent increasingly committed himself to reversing the decision to sell as further analysis, public meetings and staff discussion took place. Quinn's study of top level decision making in several major corporations suggests that it is important to wait for such commitment to action to develop, since successful implementation depends upon a group of people who feel personally committed to the new

action.[6] Argument in favor of a particular decision can be an important factor in creating that commitment.

Commitment also can be problematic, if the alternative which generates support is not ultimately chosen. But the political process can help relieve the pressure it creates, in part through the development of synthetic alternatives. Political activity can be viewed as a natural Hegelian dialectic, quite similar to the dialectic debate that Mason and Mitroff argue should deliberately be developed to investigate policy alternatives. The important benefit from juxtaposing opposing ideas, whether they arise from staff assignments or are the natural result of political activity, is the possibility of a third, synthetic position, which draws upon the benefits of both points of view.[7]

We also saw that the understanding engendered by political debate moved beyond support of specific decision alternatives. In the school decision, for example, the Board ultimately decided to proceed with the sale of the building, rather than centralize students as the superintendent advised. While very disappointed, the superintendent quickly began thinking about alternative ways of meeting the needs he felt centralization would have met. A few months after the time consuming consideration of consolidation was finally laid to rest, he no longer felt that the negative decision was particularly important. The explanation of this initially puzzling change in attitude can be stated as a supplement to the assertion that debate helps create and evaluate the organization's alternatives. Political debate not only generates commitment to decision alternatives; it increases understanding of underlying issues which can be transferred to new decision situations.

In sum, it is argued, politics can provide something critical to organized activity--a rich and balanced set of alternatives, and a milieu in which organization members both commit themselves to specific alternatives and increase their understanding of issues which transcend specific decision situations. The individual differences and diverse pulls of self interest which lead us to wonder how organization is possible, also, in aggregate, increase the possibility for organization by providing a broader and more completely examined set of options than the single leader or leadership group can generate.

## Politics as Governance

The class size revolt of third grade parents in the school we studied "triggered" reassessment of a quite different decision to sell a "no longer needed" building. Much has been made of such triggers to decision,[8] without adequately explaining how they function as they do. I believe that the well publicized interest group complaint, like other noticeable events, helps focus many individuals' attention on the same issue. As the complaint is publicly examined, individuals are influenced by each other and tend to coalesce around a small number of interpretations of the issue. This focus is important if we take the world as ambiguous, subject to multiple interpretation, and multiple foci of attention. A subtle addition to the explanation of the third grade parents' role in the school closing decision would be that the parents facilitated a reconsideration that was likely to happen in any case. The class size issue provided a widely recognized frame of reference for addressing a much more important decision--relinquishing a major asset.

While a common focus is needed to achieve organized activity; it is inefficient to rely on random triggering events to create such a frame. The second contention of this paper is that <u>repeated decisions</u>, <u>especially routinized cycles of planning and budgeting decisions</u>, <u>provide a useful focus for political activity</u>. <u>These decisions simultaneously limit options for dissent and provide well specified possibilities for future dissent</u>.

A well established cycle of decision making highlights a limited set of outcomes (capital budget decisions, salary review, etc.) as important reoccurring benefits offered by the organization. Repeated experience with these decisions provides a more common frame of reference for organization members than the unique experience, thus increasing the likelihood that coordinated activity will ensue. Focus on a few decisions also helps relieve interest group demands on many lesser decisions.

There is a risk that concentrated attention will escalate competition among interest groups into open warfare, but an important balancing factor is also at play. The fact that these decisions occur on a pre-specified <u>cycle</u> can significantly reduce the escalation of demands and the growth of animosity between winners and losers. In school districts, for example, negotiations tend to follow an informal calendar set around a few fixed decision points: early signals of interest begin to be made in the spring of a contract renewal year; formal meetings are held in the summer; and the beginning of school is commonly seen as a point of settlement. While variations in the pattern an individual district follows may be experienced, even in a year where a new contract is not

reached "on schedule" past precedent helps determine the likelihood of a strike and its likely resolution.

Decision points can thus be seen not as one relatively unchecked stream in what March and Olsen call a garbage can process,[9] but as part of a _political_ _system_ which deliberately and regularly offers opportunities for participants, solutions and problems to interact. While it is not possible to manage the exact outcome of this interaction, as March and Olsen lament, it _is_ possible to _channel_ the timing and content of the contest than ensues, by establishing a well known cycle of important decisions.

The structure of meetings and decision points does not merely serve politics in this view, it becomes politics, and by its very structure serves to coordinate and meld difference. Focused repetitive decision making creates a common frame of reference within which coordination can be achieved. Repeated decisions also provide an opportunity for individuals and groups to be regularly exposed to the opinions of others, not only through direct debate but through a series of non-verbal signals of interest. Knowing others' concerns about well specified subjects can lead to revised demands which better incorporate the interest of others--purely as a matter of increasing the odds for one's own success. The advantage for the organization as a whole (and for the administrator attempting to adjudicate between interests) is that in the hope of achieving desired ends, interest groups and individuals begin to make their own compromises between initial desires and a more widely acceptable solution.

The formal meeting takes on particular importance as another means of containing conflict in this perspective. In the school study we were perplexed by the non-emotive, ritualistic nature of many formal meetings, especially the decision making (as opposed to "working") meetings of the school board. We finally hypothesized that formal public meetings served at least two important functions, one more obvious than the other. The formal decision making meeting provided a public opportunity for teachers, parents and members of the broader public to object to decisions. But, in these well managed districts, every effort was made to discover objections before the formal meeting. The meeting itself then became the symbolized end point of objection. If an objection was not made during the public decision making meeting, the opportunity for further legitimate objection was lost until the next cycle of decision making.

Those who had been consulted, but were still not satisfied, might use the formal meeting to make their concerns a part of the record. But this too was largely symbolic behavior. The formal complaint could be seen, in fact, less as a last test of the board's resolve and more as an early marker in the next cycle of decision making. In an organization with some memory, members can be more content with a decision that does not serve them well if they anticipate another chance to obtain their desires. Thus, it is very important that there is a "next time," and that this opportunity occurs in a well known time table.

The overall point to be made is that the very decisions which attract dissent--the "garbage cans" in March's evocative phrase--can also be constructive events which actually make organization possible by limiting and postponing inevitable differences of opinion.

## Politics as the Facilitator of Change

It has already been argued that political activity facilitates change by challenging individuals, especially top management, to explore a broader range of ideas than they are able to generate on their own.  Politics also has a deeper role to play in the change process.  The third major assertion of the paper is that <u>a viable political system develops an internal "gene pool"[10] of possibilities from which the response to genuinely new situations can be drawn.</u>

In one study of a graduate school,[11] for example, a group of faculty not well served by a new administrator first attempted to phrase their interests to coincide with his stated intentions, but then gradually developed alternative ideas about the way in which the organization should be run.  The development of these ideas among the "out group" became important when a new administrator had to be chosen.  Some candidates articulated ideas similar to those of the previous administration, but one candidate expressed ideas more in keeping with those of the "out group."  It seems quite likely that the organization's previous familiarity with these ideas contributed to this candidate's ideas being recognized and understood.  When he was chosen to head the school, by external decision makers, his ability to rather quickly implement new activities at variance with his predecessor's depended, I believe, on the fact that similar ideas already existed within the repetoire of the political system.

In this light the political system can be seen to help balance one strategic emphasis with another.  A vigorous political system includes ideas at variance with the current administration.  They serve as ready-made alternatives which can speed change in direction.  Their development

also grooms new leaders capable of carrying out new initiatives, in this case second level administrators from the former "out group" in sympathy with the new administrator.

These benefits of political activity are especially important in "strong culture" organizations. Burton Clark describes rigidity and stagnation as the particular risk of distinctive organizations with a well formulated sense of mission. He also suggests that it usually took new "activist" members from outside the organization to counteract stagnation in the colleges he studied:

> The students, faculty and administrators who flow
> in from the outside, not as well socialized to what
> the college has been as are the oldtimers, are often
> the source of new thought. In time, on the average,
> they become socialized or they go away. The chance
> for them to express themselves in influential ways
> while they are young in the organization becomes an
> important factor in change.[12]

As we understand the extent to which the world is complex, changing and difficult to interpret, it becomes more and more necessary to protect a rich variety of ideas and activities. New circumstances as well as new understanding require adaptation. In an ambiguous world the kind of adaptation that will be required cannot be known with confidence. Various interest groups, with their differing opinions about the nature of the organization, the relative importance of its tasks, and its possibilities fur future action, create options which may become critical to survival for the organization as a whole. The tolerance of deviance within the organization, and the recruitment of individuals with new ideas from outside the organization, provide the raw material for a contentious political system, but they also provide the raw material for survival and vitality.

Here is the paradox: the existence of difference, which challenges the possibility of coordinated action at one point in time, can ultimately contribute to coordinated action as the organization and its environment require new responses. Diversity in well articulated points of view diversifies the set of recognizable alternatives.

## Conclusion

For some time the literature on organization politics has claimed that conflict and political activity can be positive. But this idea is incomplete without further development. Conflict is most likely to be positive if those who oppose current activity are able, under controlled circumstances, to develop their complaints into a well articulated program for action which can be compared to the organization's current strategy. The process of development can, however, decrease commitment and fragment the organization. Conflict is thus most likely to be positive if it takes place in a stabilized political system which discourages "do or die" attempts to change the organization in favor of waiting for well specified opportunities for influence. The political process can promote coordinated action in the short run by helping individuals discover their own interests and mesh them with the interests of others. In the long run the political system can help adapt to the ambiguity and change which faces all organizations, by keeping a variety of potentially useful perspectives alive.

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## Footnotes

An earlier version of this paper was prepared for the Conference on the Management of Ambiguity and Change, University of Illinois, October 5-7, 1983.

[2] William G. Ouchi, _Theory Z_ (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1981). Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., _In Search of Excellence_ (New York: Harper and Row, 1982). Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy, _Corporate Cultures_ (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

[3] Richard M. Cyert and James G. March, _A Behavioral Theory of the Firm_ (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

[4] Jeffrey Pfeffer, _Power in Organization_ (Marshfield, Massachusetts: Pitman, 1981), p. 7.

[5] National Institute of Education Grant No. G-80-0152.

[6] James Brian Quinn, _Strategies for Change_ (Homewood, Illinois: Irwin, 1980).

[7] Richard O. Mason and Ian I. Mitroff, _Challenging Strategic Planning Assumptions_ (New York: Wiley, 1981).

[8] Donald A. Schon, "The Crisis of Professional Knowledge and the Pursuit of an Epistomology of Practice," presented at the 75th Anniversary Colloquim, Harvard University, April 3, 1984; Quinn, _op. cit._; Marjorie Lyles, "The Formulation of the Nature of Strategic Problems," _Strategic Management Journal_, Vol. 2 (1981), 61-75.

[9] James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, _Ambiguity and Choice in Organization_ (Bergen, Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 1976).

[10] Karl E. Weick, _The Social Psychology of Organizing_ (1969; Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979). Bill McKelvey, _Organizational Systematics_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[11] Anne Sigismund Huff, "A Rhetorical Examination of Strategic Change," in Louis R. Pondy et. al., eds., _Organizational Symbolism_ (Greenwich, Connecticut: JAI Press, 1983).

[12] Burton R. Clark, _The Distinctive College_ (Chicago: Aldine, 1960).

Footnotes

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[2]William G. Ouchi, Theory Z (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1981).  Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., In Search of Excellence (New York:  Harper and Row, 1982).  Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy, Corporate Cultures (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

[3]Richard M. Cyert and James G. March, A Behavioral Theory of the Firm (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey:  Prentice-Hall, 1963).

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